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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MINSK 000044

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [BO](#)
SUBJECT: SIGNATURE CAMPAIGN MOVING FORWARD, DESPITE HARASSMENT

Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The signature collecting campaign, the second phase of the presidential election, is in full swing. The Central Election Committee gave contenders until January 27 to collect the 100,000 signatures needed to be registered as a presidential candidate. President Lukashenko's initiative group announced it had collected 930,000 signatures, but news sources report that many were collected by coercing students and government employees. Ten Plus candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich leads all other candidate hopefuls with 140,000 signatures collected. Reports of interference in the signature collection campaign are common. Police have allegedly detained signature gatherers and banned signature collecting in public places. Independent candidate Voitovich gathered 20,000 signatures before he bowed out of the election after predicting that the March elections would be fraudulent. The common opinion shared among the candidates' parties is that the GOB will find a way to prevent candidates from getting on the ballot through less visible means. However, some analysts believe the authorities will allow all candidates to be on the ballot in order to further split the opposition support and make the elections appear more free and fair. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On January 11, Lukashenko's initiative group announced it had collected 930,000 signatures. On January 16, Milinkevich's group reported that it had collected 140,427 signatures, taking the lead among other candidates, and expected to have 250,000 by the end of the signature campaign on January 27. Milinkevich's regional trip manager, Ales Yanukevich, told Poloff on January 4 that Milinkevich originally expected to gather one million signatures. Aleksandr Kozulin's group, the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Gramada) claimed to have gathered 120,000 signatures and plans to have 300,000 by the end of the campaign. Zenon Poznyak's Conservative Christian Party on January 11 claimed to have collected over 40,000 signatures and expected to gather an additional 150,000. MP and leader of the Liberal Democratic Party (pro-Lukashenko) Sergey Gaidukevich announced on January 16 that he had collected 124,000 signatures and General Valery Frolov claimed to have 60,000 signatures. Jailed activist Sergey Skrebets on January 12 reportedly had 35,000 signatures.

GOB Interference

¶3. (U) On January 10, secretary of the Central Election Commission (CEC) Nikolai Lozovik described the signature campaign to the press as "calm" with few serious complaints. According to Lozovik, the only complaint registered with the CEC came from Kozulin's Social-Democratic Party (Gramada) and was similar to other complaints that happen "tens" of times during elections. However, Lozovik assured that the CEC would solve the problem as soon as possible to avoid any "speculation."

¶4. (SBU) Though Lozovik claimed the campaign was running

smoothly, the opposition teams are reporting government interference. According to Milinkevich's group, police are constantly detaining signature collectors and preventing them from collecting in public places. Poloff on January 8 spoke to a Milinkevich supporter who was gathering signatures on Minsk's main street, Independence Avenue. The supporter, standing in a booth with Milinkevich's picture in plain view, told poloff that police constantly harass signature gatherers and often tell them to move. According to Milinkevich's campaign manager Sergei Kalyakin, 60 percent of all signature collectors have been questioned by the police and 40 individuals quit due to pressure from the authorities.

15. (U) According to CEC rules, initiative groups can collect signatures in public places, such as subways and markets. However, initiative groups throughout the country are being barred from collecting in public places. A Milinkevich signature collector was detained and released in Pinsk on January 3 in the market after police claimed his accreditation to Milinkevich's party was false. Later that day, the same collector refused to allow police to search his document folder and was again detained, this time for "insubordination." On January 4, he was detained in the market for allegedly keeping "unsanitary" conditions at his signature booth. On January 5, police told Milinkevich signature gatherers that they would have to move their booths away from TSUM (Minsk's central department store) because they did not have permission to collect signatures in a public place. The police failed to show proof of the alleged law and claimed to be acting out the orders of the city authorities.

16. (U) Paznyak's group reported on January 5 that police banned their members from gathering signatures in subway stations and dormitories. Kozulin reported that the authorities in Vitebsk instructed police to prevent Kozulin supporters from gathering

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signatures within the city. On January 9, Kozulin's party sent a complaint to the CEC about the authorities' "persistent and strong psychological pressure" on members, in particular, threats and blackmail that already caused five Kozulin supporters to abandon the campaign.

Luka's Strategy: Coercion

17. (C) Numerous reports have surfaced about authorities coercing students, government workers, and state industry employees to sign their support for Lukashenko. On January 6, independent news source Charter97 reported that students at Belarusian universities were forced to sign for Lukashenko's nomination as a candidate or risk expulsion, low grades, and/or eviction from dormitories. At the Belarusian State University (BSU), students in the chemistry, mathematics, history, economy, philosophy, philology, and journalism departments reported that they were coerced to sign for Lukashenko before taking their final exams. On January 5, a student informed poloffs that before his exams, the university rector passed Lukashenko's signature petition around the classroom and "strongly" encouraged them to sign. According to the student, no one did.

18. (U) On January 9, Charter97 allegedly received a letter from students in the mathematics and mechanics department at BSU who accused the university administration of threatening students with evictions from dormitories if they did not sign for Lukashenko within three days. The students expect authorities to visit the dormitories during early voting in March, much like they did during the 2004 referendum, and go room to room forcing students to vote for Lukashenko.

19. (U) On January 11, Kozulin's party filed another complaint at the CEC in response to allegations that the Slutsk city government forced employees of government-controlled organizations to sign for Lukashenko. According to Kozulin's group, people who are not part of Lukashenko's initiative group are gathering signatures for Lukashenko during working hours.

In Polotsk on January 7 and 8, employees at two kindergartens were forced to sign for Lukashenko after being threatened with dismissal. Kozulin's group called the irregularities unlawful and a violation of voting rights.

The Foreseeable Outcome

¶10. (C) Yanukevich doubted that the authorities would interfere too much with the signature campaign because it would be too obvious to foreign observers. Instead, he believes that during the signature verification process, the newly formed territorial election commissions, which include mostly Lukashenko supporters, could possibly dismiss thousands of Milinkevich signatures for alleged falsifications. If Milinkevich was denied the right to be on the presidential ballot, Yanukevich claimed that the Milinkevich's team would organize a 20,000-person march.

¶11. (C) Aleksandr Voitovich, independent candidate and academic, dropped out of the race on January 9 after collecting only 20,000 signatures. His political consultant Anatoly Fedorov told Poloff on Jan 9 that Voitovich's signature gatherers were losing their jobs and businesses and the GOB was using less visible methods of harassment. He also considered the campaign to be an illusion for the public and claimed that if he continued to participate, he would only be helping the GOB fool people into thinking the elections would be free and fair. According to Fedorov, Voitovich plans to avoid the election all together and it is doubtful that he or his team would support any other opposition contender. Fedorov expected General Frolov to bow out of the race in the near future and that only three candidates, including Lukashenko, would make it on the ballot.

The CEC's Opinion

¶12. (C) Pol/Econ Chief and Poloff met with CEC Secretary Lozovik on January 17 to discuss the CEC's official warnings to Milinkevich and Poznyak's initiative groups for distributing campaign materials during the signature campaign. According to Belarus' electoral laws, initiative groups are not to campaign until their presidential hopeful is officially registered as a candidate. Lozovik claimed to have verbally warned Milinkevich and Poznyak's groups several times to cease campaigning, but to no avail. On January 18, both initiative groups would meet with Lozovik and the CEC would then decide what actions to take. Lozovik claimed he did not know if the CEC would punish the two initiative groups or not, but the worst case scenario would be to invalidate the signatures collected in the regions where the electoral violations took place. If the violations occurred across the country, Milinkevich and Poznyak could lose all their

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signatures and have to start from the beginning. Lozovik hoped it would not come to this and stressed that he would like to register all seven presidential hopefuls as candidates. [Note: The CEC ended up issuing an official warning to both groups on January 18, but did not invalidate signatures. Milinkevich called the reasons behind the warning "far-fetched" and announced plans to contest the warning at the Supreme Court. Poznyak's group claimed that the distribution of printed the materials was legal and called on other initiative groups to do the same. Head of the CEC Ludmila Yermoshina, after listening to Poznyak's statement, regretted that the CEC's official warning was "too mild."]

¶13. (C) Poloff asked Lozovik about rumored violations from Lukashenko's initiative group, particularly reports about officials coercing students and government employees to sign their support for the President. A defensive Lozovik claimed that such reports were based on rumors, not on facts, and that Lukashenko's support was so high that he did not need to resort to such measures. The CEC reviewed Kozulin's complaints, particularly about kindergarten teachers in Vitebsk. Lozovik pointed out that alleged violations took place on Saturday and

Sunday when school was not in session, and therefore, the teachers could not have been forced to sign on the alleged date. Kozulin's other complaints also allegedly proved to be false. According to Lozovik, if students and state employees were being forced to sign for Lukashenko, they should send official letters to the CEC and the Prosecutor General's office, not to news sources and foreign institutions. If officials are abusing their power on behalf of Lukashenko's campaign, then they are acting on their own accord and should be removed. Although Lozovik opined that these accusations were false, he claimed the CEC would investigate.

Comment

114. (C) Post is in agreement with Yanukevich and Fedorov that the GOB will use many means to tilt the wheel in greater favor to Lukashenko. The CEC will have ten days to verify the authenticity of signatures following the January 27 deadline. Judging from the 2004 parliamentary elections, it is during this process that thousands of signatures could be declared invalid for clerical technicalities or alleged falsifications. But some analysts have told Post that the CEC may allow all presidential hopefuls on the ballot, as such a move would further split the "democratic vote" and show the international community that the GOB is conducting free and fair elections. According to his view, Lukashenko is content with his high ratings (around 54 percent) and would settle for a less fraudulent, but nonetheless convincing victory over a rigged election that would cast even greater doubt on the legitimacy of his government.

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